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IRINA F. SHCHERBATOVA

## Lermontov: The Failure of Humanism

*In this article, Lermontov is viewed as one who expresses ideas of humanism not associated with any social class or cast that was typical for the aristocratic period of the Russian culture. The article discusses the situation when the orientation of the democratic criticism—dominant at the time—at the understanding of humanism that had only limited association with a specific class did not contribute to the realization of humanist ideals, leading instead to social disintegration, and a nihilistic neglect of culture and identity.*

**Keywords:** *Lermontov, aristocracy, absolute humanism, solitude, honor, Übermensch, “little man”*

Lermontov rose to fame after writing the poem “Death of the Poet,” in which he reproached high society for persecuting Pushkin. The poetry was emotionally complex, politically challenging, while at the same time patriotically driven. The life of the poet, spent between Tsarskoe Selo and the Caucasus (where he distinguished himself courageously) was scattered and at times incoherent. According to his contemporaries, Lermontov aspired to high society, but he also denounced it. He spent much of his time in the Karamzin salon, whose members during the tragic days of Pushkin’s

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Translated by Peter Golub.

final duel were on the side of George Dantes. The complexity of the poet's personality and the contradictions inherent in his writing have led to a wide variety of interpretations.

The problem with defining Lermontov's place in the historical and cultural landscape is related to the abstruseness of 1830s. This is one of the least differentiated periods in the history of Russian culture and social thought. Its assessment is usually defined by the predetermined goals of a given scholarly investigation.

The three main characteristics of this period are usually listed as: (a) a heightened political response to growing autocracy; (b) a shift from politics to philosophy, resulting in the broad interest in (primary German) philosophy displayed by a variety of social groups, which, in turn, led to the emerging of nonacademic philosophy; and (c) the search for a socially unifying mythology, embodied in the triad "autocracy, orthodoxy, nationality." The present article considers this ideological state of affairs as evidence of the stabilization of the nobility in the mid-1830s, which came to accept the need for modernization.

We will try to correlate Lermontov's position with the above three characteristics, and show that as a well-educated and precocious individual, with family ties connecting him to the Decembrists, he was not indifferent to the spiritual needs of society or to its dramatic events. Although politics and philosophy were not central to Lermontov's system of values, it is possible to speak of the political and philosophical nature of his work. What preoccupied Lermontov most of all was the exceptional individual who stands in opposition to society and is forced into solitude.

Below, we will consider Lermontov's creativity within the scope of the Russian humanist tradition, and argue that the humanism proposed by Lermontov coincided with the attempts of conservative elites to create a new social consensus. Unfortunately, in both cases these intentions were utopian.

Soviet historiographers looked at the 1830s exclusively as a period when society came to terms with the experience of the Decembrists and the state's reaction. On this view, Lermontov is described as extending the Decembrist position. This position was first outlined by A.I. Herzen, who Soviet historiographers were incapable of reading critically. In his essay, "On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia," Herzen connected Lermontov with the revolutionary tradition. Herzen attributed Lermontov's peculiar reflexivity and "passionate" thinking to heightened political sensitivity and disillusionment resulting from the defeat of the Decembrist revolt.<sup>1</sup> The attempts of Soviet historiographers to concretize Lermontov's political commitment on the basis of scant factual evidence relating to the

*circle of sixteen* (which included Lermontov) is unconvincing.<sup>2</sup> According to E.G. Gerstein, Lermontov's opposition testifies to the brutality with which Nicholas I persecuted the poet—exiled to the Caucasus, Lermontov's regiment was exposed to heavy fighting. However, the emperor's cruelty was not unfounded. Lermontov was exiled after fighting a duel, and according to the laws of the time Lermontov should have been demoted, and was spared only because nobody was injured in the exchange. Gerstein is correct, however, in saying that Nicholas disliked the poet. Having received news of his death, the tsar is said to have told his family: "A fitting way for a dog to die."<sup>3</sup> Lermontov's killer, N.S. Martynov, went unpunished, which led P.A. Vyazemsky to make the now famous statement: "Lermontov reflects Pushkin. People shoot at our poets better than at Louis Philippe. Yet again the bullet didn't miss its mark." Vyazemsky went on to pointedly remark (in relation to a duel that occurred during Catherine I's reign): "He was killed, but not entirely correctly."<sup>4</sup> Vyazemsky's letter reflected the general opinion that the death of the poet contented the establishment.

However, this line of inquiry is not particularly productive; the absence of concrete evidence contributes to perpetual conjecture, and the attribution of revolutionary zeal to this or that line of poetry is highly speculative. Although the revolutionary tone and celebration of freedom in a poem like *Mtsyri* is undeniable, it again is not as straightforward as considered by Herzen. Judging by the impressions left by the poet's contemporaries, politics was of little interest to him. A more productive approach to the problem can be found in T. Eagleton's methodology, which considers the author as dispersed throughout the text, where "the imagination itself . . . becomes a political force."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this accounts for Nicholas I's reaction, who understood that Lermontov as an aristocrat was not an enemy. Any juxtaposition of the Romantic poet himself and Nicholas I's regime is inevitably fraught with oversimplification and even spurious sociological exaggeration. When considering Romantic writers, Eagleton's methodology helps avoid oversimplification. He writes, "If the transcendental nature of the imagination offered a challenge to an anemic rationalism, it could also offer the writer a comfortingly absolute alternative to history itself."<sup>6</sup>

It also seems unproductive to draw direct parallels between Lermontov's work and the major philosophical systems of his time, in particular, the philosophy of Schelling and Hegel.<sup>7</sup> On this view, Lermontov is considered "a son of the dialectic age," and its father, Hegel, as "playing a major role in the development of the author's art."<sup>8</sup>

The Schellingism and Hegelianism of the 1830s is foremost linked by historians to the philosophical (and rather apolitical) circle of Nikolai

Stankevich. Lermontov and Stankevich both matriculated at Moscow State University in 1830, and it is possible that the two knew each other. They would have certainly met in the theater, which they both frequented, but that seems to be the extent of their acquaintance. Abstract thought clearly did not interest Lermontov. Although, in his adolescent play *Menschen und Leidenschaften* the hero (based on his father) praises German science and philosophy, and in particular echoes Plato: “The philosopher of truth is the happiest person in the world—he who knows that he knows nothing.”<sup>9</sup> Lermontov believed that “philosophy is not the science of atheism, but is the most effective remedy for it.”<sup>10</sup> This vision of philosophy was shared by Stankevich; however, unlike Stankevich, Lermontov’s views on the subject are limited to these few lines in his early play. Judging by the dramatic work of the first half of the 1830s, the young writer’s imagination produced plot after plot on a variety of themes, including love, deceit, betrayal, suffering, and solitude. This early period is already significant in terms of defining Lermontov’s ideals.

Lermontov wrote *Menschen und Leidenschaften* and *A Strange Man* (1831) in his student days. These were his first experiments with prose, and although they are imperfect and naive, his voice with its tragic worldview is already evident. The second major theme of these plays is serfdom. The elucidation of his position on the issue was crucial for the development of his system of values.

The action of the tragedy *Menschen und Leidenschaften* unfolds against the backdrop of the everyday life of the landed gentry, which is depicted without tendentiousness. The character Marfa Gromova (modeled on his grandmother) is given unflattering traits typical of a landowner who “slaps the girls on their cheeks.” The servants too are unflatteringly represented as selfish and hypocritical.<sup>11</sup>

The play *A Strange Man* brings to the stage a peasant who describes the atrocities of his landowner, who beseeches one of the protagonists to buy Marfa’s village. Based on Lermontov’s description of the landlords’ cruelty, the critics had every reason for discussing the author’s antiserfdom position. However, the scene with the peasant is followed by a monologue delivered by Vladimir Arbenin, which is usually ignored by critics, but which clearly shows that a critique of serfdom was not particularly important for the young author. Lermontov did not denounce the system of serfdom, but—following the humanist tradition of N.I. Novikov—bad landlords. The peasant in *A Strange Man*, even says that in the nearby village, where the landlord is good, the peasants live well and sing songs. Lermontov’s position embodies an attitude typical of the nobility for whom the problem was not the institution of slavery, but the abuse of power within the system.

The problem in the play is resolved when the village is bought by the benevolent landlord Vladimir Belinsky, who is glad to “help ease the suffering of humanity.” With these words, Lermontov hardly avoids the obvious irony: Arbenin (as an alter ego the author) is convinced that “there are people even more worthy of compassion than this muzhik.” The maliciousness of the previous landowner, in his opinion, is but a “superficial sorrow” that “will pass.” These superficial sorrows cannot compare to the spiritual suffering of the hero. For Lermontov, far greater is the suffering of the man “who no one understands.”<sup>12</sup>

The dialogue between the two friends is important. Belinsky reproaches Arbenin for his egoism, and refers to his friend’s spiritual suffering as “chimeras,” and asks the direct question: “Is it even possible to compare a free man with a slave?” This would seem the voice of a progressive man, but for Arbenin, Belinsky is merely a rich “bastard” who steals his bride (i.e., he is portrayed as an amoral person, a negative character). In fact, Arbenin is concerned only with his inner life. In this system of values, slavery is not regarded as intrinsically wrong: “One is a slave of man, the other a slave of fate. The former can expect a good lord or at least has some choice—for the latter, there is nothing.”<sup>13</sup>

The theme of serfdom remained merely an episode in Lermontov’s early work, but the theme of existential solitude he would continue to be developed for the rest of his life. If the clash between the individual and society leaves room for an element of social critique in Lermontov’s work, then poems like “Farewell, Unwashed Russia, Land of Slaves, Country of Gentlemen”<sup>\*</sup> give little evidence for the theme of antiserfdom.

F.M. Dostoevsky believed that had Lermontov lived longer “he would have turned to the people. . . . If he had only stopped belabouring the sore character of the Russian intellectual tormented by his Europeanism, he would have probably found the answer, the same answer discovered by Pushkin, a devotion to the truth of the people. . . .”<sup>14</sup> This interpretation of Lermontov’s ideal development is evidence of the author’s penchant for ideological myth, which was also shared by Herzen who sought to place Lermontov within the tradition of the revolutionary nobility. However, it is clear that Dostoevsky, like Herzen, was far from an expert on “the people,” who he mostly portrayed as urbanites. In 1875, Dostoevsky completed his novel *The Adolescent*, in which he spend plenty of time “belabouring the sore character of the Russian intellectual,” specifically in his portrayal of

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<sup>\*</sup>In Russian: “Proshch'ai, nemytaia Rossiia, Strana rabov, strana gospod.”—Trans.

Versilov (tormented by Europeanism)—a character much more convincing than all his pretensions regarding the “truth of the people.”

Lermontov’s Arbenin, despite the apparent inhumanity of his position, was actually quite historically accurate. The enlightened nobility of 1830s and 1840s was not particularly burdened by serfdom. It was significantly more concerned with the growing pressure of the regime on its identity, and the dwindling of its personal space and independence as a result of private and public censorship, show trials, and informants. This related primarily to the enlightened part of society for whom personal integrity was vital. V.A. Zhukovsky called it: “perfidy made law.” Zhukovsky’s position was typical of aristocratic society at the beginning of Nicholas I’s reign, when ideas like constitution, sovereign society, or even individual independence evaporated from public consciousness: “I am convinced that the surest guardian of public order is not policing, not spying, but a moral state.”<sup>15</sup> This was the general consensus of the society to which Lermontov belonged.

Lermontov’s *A Strange Man* has much in common with A.S. Griboyedov’s play *Woe from Wit*. Lermontov’s play develops Griboyedov’s character Chatsky (the name Chatsky is even mentioned among the guests).<sup>16</sup> Lermontov submerges his Byronic hero (dying of solitude and misapprehension) into the Famusovsky context.\* It is typical to see in Griboyedov’s play a sharp criticism of a meretricious, vulgar, and callous society. Lermontov also saw in it the familiar pain of solitude.

In his portrayal of Chatsky, Griboyedov (for the first time in Russian literature) raised the problem of solitude felt by the exceptional individual. This would go on to be Lermontov’s leitmotif. Griboyedov is likewise close to Lermontov in his appreciation of the individual who being unlike others is not understood or accepted by high society. Starting with these early plays and continuing into the novels *Princess Ligovskaya* and *Hero of Our Time*, Lermontov will emphasize the demonic essence and existential solitude of his main characters.

The Romanticism, demonism, and psychological depth of Lermontov’s work was originally inspired by the dramas of Shakespeare and Lessing, as well as Schiller, Byron, and even Étienne Pivert de Senancour’s psychological novel *Obermann* (1804). But it is equally important to acknowledge his genetic link with the personalism of the Russian humanist tradition (going back to Novikov, Griboyedov, and Pushkin)—a tradition

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\*Pavel Famusov is the father in *Woe from Wit*. He is a conservative high-ranking bureaucrat, a banal philosopher, and a typical representative of the establishment.—Trans.

that afforded a high value to personal identity and human dignity, which Lermontov gleaned (probably not entirely consciously) from Griboyedov.

The play, *Woe from Wit*, was published in 1824, but by the mid-1830s not only was Griboyedov dated according to public opinion, but so was Pushkin, whose popularity had begun to plummet. In a letter to his brother in 1836, S.N. Karamzin wrote, “Bulgarin called Pushkin ‘the light that fades at noon.’ . . . How awful it is that some Bulgarin, pouring his venom on Pushkin, cannot say anything more insidious than the truth!”<sup>17</sup> I.I. Panaev seems to come close to identifying the reason why the reader had cooled to Pushkin: “The young generation began to cool markedly toward the poet. Society began to exhibit a vague and dim desire for a new word, for literature to climb down from its lofty heights and enter real life—take at least some part in the interests of the public.”<sup>18</sup>

The new literary setting raised the issue of the commensurability of national literature and the growing civil and aesthetic demands of the public. It is quite natural that the old “innovators” were now deemed the new “archaists.” At the beginning of the 1800s, the division between the archaists and innovators reflected the development of the literary language of aristocratic culture, but did not reflect its social foundations. Debates revolved around the use of language, not the trustworthiness of the author. At first glance, the case of the 1830s aristocratic writers seemed to concern a form of social commentary. Belonging to the aristocratic wing put into question the quality of the literature and the author’s literary aesthetic. However, the demand for realism (of which Panaev was a proponent) continued to be a major literary criterion. Thus, N.M. Karamzin’s *Poor Liza* was revolutionary when compared to G.R. Derzhavin’s odes, and Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter* (published at the end of 1836) seemed innovative when compared to his earlier work. Finally, Lermontov’s mature work was not only impervious to socially motivated attacks, but demonstrated the enormous potential of the aristocratic wing of Russian literature. The literary promise of the aristocratic author astounded contemporaries with his unprecedented intellectualism and psychological force. Lermontov raised literature to the next level, giving it a new sense of intimate connection to reality. After the poem, “Death of the Poet,” Lermontov would live only four more years, if not in the shadow of Pushkin, then in his inevitable comparison. S.P. Shevryov, for example, saw in Lermontov merely one of Pushkin’s mediocre imitators. Most, however, “saw in Lermontov something entirely original; many were inspired by the depth of his inspiration, his emotional valence, the sheer magnitude of his fantasy, the fullness of life, and the dramatically palpable presence of mind in his artistic form.”<sup>19</sup>



All this suggests that the problem of the aristocratic writers was essentially a cultural one, which nonetheless had to be solved through literary expression. Lermontov's portrayal of the depths of the human spirit was so powerful that Belinsky shrewdly recognized the humanist, universal significance of the work: "In this great talent there is an abundance of an internal, subjective element that is a sign of humanism. . . . The great poet, speaking of himself, of his individual I, simultaneously speaks of the universal, the human."<sup>20</sup>

By connecting Lermontov with the crisis of aristocratic literature, we are trying to unravel the microcultural situation of the thirties and to show the beginnings of the gathering pace of democratic ideology. For a considerable part of the young reading public (easily absorbed by ideological controversy), the democratic critics had for the most part rejected the whole of Pushkin's late prose, with its unobtrusive humanist pathos. These critics likewise promoted a nihilistic disregard for talent if it belonged to a socially alien "element." Thus, the already divided public was further split, and the democratic critics neither recognized the attempts of the aristocratic writers to produce a common, unifying literature, nor, most importantly, did they feel there was a need for this literature.

It must be emphasized that presently we are discussing the second half of the 1830s and first half of the 1840s, when the peasantry was still loyal to the autocracy—"And you its loyal people"—and when the state was attempting to resolve its social contradictions, and the topic of serfdom had not been placed on the agenda by the democratic camp, which had yet to come into existence. In this context, Lermontov's work can be seen as an attempt to unite society by, on the one hand, addressing existential themes that would elevate it above its "temporary" problems, and, on the other hand, to offer up a simple and easily understood patriotism. But the problems persisted, and the irresolute, apprehensive government was incapable of changing the feudal inertia of the landed gentry. Thus, the class hatred that later swept away the humanist achievements of the nobility and its culture of universal human values, was nothing short of retaliation.

If Russian literature is a mirror of society, then by the 1840s, according to the democratic critics, this society was the stage on which the "little man" and the "superfluous man" struggled against one another. For humanist culture this was a catastrophe. The problem was not that the ideas of humanism did not have a strong tradition in Russian literature, and were not well known by the critics who influenced the formation of the new social consciousness. The problem was that the humanist worldview advanced by the democratic critics (who by then dominated public

discourse) was put exclusively in terms of class conflict. The humanism of the “little man” was already limited by the pathetic. And the characteristics that in the humanist tradition were universal became paradoxically assigned (without exception) to the “superfluous man.” Apropos here is V. Nabokov’s sarcastic quip about the thousands of pages devoted the “type”—the “superfluous man,” the metaphysical “dandy,”\*

The hero of I.S. Turgenev’s *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), who so captivated Herzen, was so petty and insignificant, it is impossible to compare him with the heroes of Pushkin, Lermontov, Goncharov, and Turgenev’s own other work. What is the point of describing an individual’s contradictions, mistakes, and tragedies, if the critic looking for an expedient phrase dismisses that individual as socially and culturally superfluous? What does it say about our theory of literature and history when 160 years later the epithet is used as if it were a scientific criterion? In fact, the incriminating connotation of the “superfluous man” shows a lack of knowledge about the cultural meaning of free time, as well as ignores the fact that in the mid-1800s, several generations of the nobility considered themselves as belonging to the free gentry.

But before the “class trend” gained popularity in literature and criticism, nearly the same role was played by P.Y. Chadaev’s “First Philosophical Letter” (1836). First, it brought to the fore the painful topic of Russian messianism, which so distracted the enlightened public from Russia’s real problems, and, second, it instigated the meaningless and divisive cultural dispute of Westernizers vs. Slavophiles. Contempt for the country and messianism were psychoemotional responses—an attempt to compensate for a loss in the belief of a coherent whole. This is the basis for the Byronic personality, which both dwarfs and despises society.

In order to show the paradoxical nature and ambiguity of humanity, Lermontov juxtaposes the hero and antihero—Pechorin and Krasinsky in *Princess Ligovskaya* (1836). Lermontov not only uses the dramatic storyline of the love plot, but also sets up a conflict between two types of morality existing unequally at two different strata of the same social class—a conflict Pushkin never truly took up. Before Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (1842), the young author was already addressing the social inequality

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\*The full quote reads: “. . . and thousands of pages have been devoted to him as a ‘type’ of something or other (e.g., of a ‘superfluous man’ or a metaphysical ‘dandy,’ etc.). Brodsky (1950), standing on the soapbox that had been provided to him a hundred of years ago by Belinsky, Herzen, and many others, diagnosed Onegin’s ‘sickness’ as the result of ‘tsarist despotism.’” V. Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin: Commentary and Index* (Princeton University Press, 1990), vol. 2, p. 151.—Trans.

existing within the nobility itself. For Lermontov, the social bottom—penury—did not justify relegating an individual to a different category. This explains why there are no “little men” in Lermontov’s work. The impoverished nobleman, Krasinsky, although subjected to the humiliating circumstances of poverty, is by no means a “little man.” In Russian literature, Lermontov’s prose represents humanism in its absolute form, which, with the exception of Turgenev and Goncharov, was stifled by the humanism of the “little man.” Lermontov did not write about the “little man,” and his prose lacks the sentimentality of the Natural School. He is foremost concerned not with pitying humanity, but with recognizing its intrinsic dignity. This fundamental point was even recognized by Belinsky, who having met the recently arrested author wrote to V.P. Botkin: “I was pleased to see in his cool, rational, and embittered view of life and people a deep faith in the dignity of both.”<sup>21</sup>

Absolute humanism is quite different from the humanism of the “little man.” The idea of the intrinsic value of the individual is crucial for the development of social self-awareness. In a society where everyone is either a slave or a lord (in the words of M.M. Speransky) aristocratic privilege can be maintained, but salvaging human dignity is practically impossible. The theme of human dignity in the context of an oppressive regime was touched upon by N.M. Karamzin, and in the late writings and letters of Pushkin, Vyazemsky, Zhukovsky. As an author, Lermontov recognized this aspect of Russian life in his early work.

The humanist component of Russian culture has yet to have its own history—it has been episodic, occurring in the rare periods when society and the state are on the same path. Lermontov’s further creative development, with its unprecedented (for Russian cultural) existential and demonic qualities, would change the course of Russian literature—and the poet’s early death was an enormous loss for Russian culture. Once his work was interrupted, there was no one to take his place. V. Rozanov, who wrote extensively about Lermontov’s “extraordinary” role, was not alone in the belief that if Lermontov had not died so young, our literary development would have taken a different course: “Lermontov was the very crown of our literary and spiritual life.”<sup>22</sup>

Pechorin was to follow Onegin, but he was not to be followed by Beltov, who opened the way to a lazy coterie of hapless gentry intellectuals—Beltov (1846), Rudin (1856), Lavretsky (1859), and Oblomov (1859) on one side, and Chichikov (1842) and Makar Devushkin (1845) on the other. These latter had little humanity to them, and instead of representing heroic types were rather (in spite of their purported realism) the personification of ideas.

The heroes of Lermontov's prose presented the Russian reader with an unprecedented model of interminable self-reflection and provocative morality. Their inherent sense of superiority, allowed them to coolly use and manipulate those around them. Before the birth of Fredrick Nietzsche, Lermontov created characters that are the embodiment of the *Übermensch*. This type of negative charisma would later be developed in part by Dostoevsky in characters like Svidrigailov and Stavrogin. However, Dostoevsky was primarily focused on representing vice, while a character like Lermontov's Pechorin is psychologically much more complex. In fact, Lermontov remained the lone forerunner of Nietzsche in Russian literature.

V. Solov'ev was the first to identify Lermontov's Nietzscheanism, linking it with a feature of his personality: "I see in Lermontov the direct ancestor of that spirit, and direction of thought, feeling, and, in part, action that for the sake of brevity can be called 'Nietzscheanism.' . . . The primary feature of Lermontov's genius is a terrible tension and concentration of thought in itself, in his individual "I," containing the terrible force of his personal feelings."<sup>23</sup> In part, Lermontov's proto-Nietzscheanism has its roots in his demonic Byronism. Unlike Pushkin, Lermontov did not eschew the Byronic tradition, but augmented it. He not only gave his main characters many Byronic traits, but also donned the Byronic cloak himself. The source is the same, but Lermontov's interpretation of the Byronic type is quite different: Lermontov is attracted not by a naive Romanticism, but the demonic, which in Russian literature can be traced back to Pushkin's "Queen of Spades."

For a long time after Lermontov's death, demonism was absent from Russian literature, but the humanist tradition continued. The paradox was that the democratic critics were opposed to absolute humanism, perceiving it as a product of elite nobility; however, they supported the humanism of the "little man." Here, Gogol seemed a proper fit. N.G. Chernyshevsky declared the decade following Pushkin as the Gogol Period; however, he failed to recognize that Gogol wrote specifically within the aristocratic paradigm. The year following Lermontov's death, Gogol published "The Overcoat," and the democratic critics praised and pitied the "little man" when Gogol himself openly spoke of Akaky Akakievich as a subhuman specimen. Gogol considered his work not realistic, but grotesque. He recalled: "When I began reading the first chapters of *Dead Souls* to Pushkin, . . . he grew pale. When the reading was finished, he said, mournfully: 'God, how depressing our Russia is!' I was amazed. Pushkin, who knew Russia well, did not realize that the whole thing was a farce, a complete invention."<sup>24</sup>

Gogol tried to express genuine humanism in the second volume of *Dead Souls*, which was supposed to present a dignified image of humanity, instead of his usual burlesque homunculi. Of Gogol, N.A. Nekrasov wrote: "He preaches love for the Hostile words of negation," and after a long period of soul searching wrote, "We are brought into this world not in order to kill and destroy."<sup>25</sup> Gogol believed that the ultimate goal of literature was to show the beauty of humanity, but was uncertain how to make this happen. At the end of his life, the language of proselytizing seemed the most apt. This fact, however, does not negate the extraordinary work Gogol produced in support of human dignity.

Representatives of the aristocratic camp maintained the importance of honesty, compassion, and humanity. For these writers, according to I. Annensky, dignity and freedom were both "ethical and aesthetic principles."<sup>26</sup> Even the image of Oblomov, in spite of its polarity, evokes sympathy.

Absolute humanism also distinguished Turgenev. The first story in *A Sportsman's Sketches*, "Khor and Kalinych," was published in 1847, and although the author despised serfdom, he did not portray his peasant characters as miserable little men. The critics immediately identified the characters Khor and Kalinych as uncharacteristic and idealized. They are not humiliated or broken by serfdom. In the first half of the 1800s, *A Sportsman's Sketches* was a rare example of a Russian author depicting the life of the common man. In the consciousness of the nobility, the *person* was more valuable than the *peasant*—with the rare exception of *A Sportsman's Sketches*, and even earlier in Lermontov's "Borodino," where the peasant transcends the lowness of his class and acquires a face and a voice. Within Russia's paternalistic system, nobility proudly considered itself the guardian of the people. The aristocrat saw the people as essentially incompetent, and although society did not consider the people as objects of culture, the nobility was attributed universal traits. With time, although it bore the marks of Westernization, beginning with Karamzin and Pushkin, this aristocratic Russian literature acquired a national tone.

With its emphasis on the dignity of the individual, this trend could have become a unifying force in Russian culture, but it did not—the absolute humanism avowed by Lermontov lost. Heightened social tensions made a critical attitude toward this branch of Russian culture the norm, in light of which Lermontov seemed a hopeless Romantic. Of course, Lermontov was a Romantic, but this did not negate his humanism, so necessary for the formation of a conscious society.

This point was recognized by Belinsky, specifically regarding the universality of Lermontov's work. Belinsky, comparing the poetry of Lermontov and Koltsov, pointed out a paradox: Koltsov is obviously a folk poet, but not a national one, because the forms of folk poetry are untranslatable. Lermontov's work, on the other hand, is "imbued with the Russian spirit and expresses a universal style, . . . which without ceasing to be national, remains accessible in any century or country."<sup>27</sup>

The above picture is a complex one. On the one hand, Lermontov's creative motives coincided with the attempts of Arzamasians like D.N. Bludov, D.V. Dashkov, and S.S. Uvarov to modernize Nicholas I's Russia by uniting society and the people with a common mythology. Having lived through the collapse of the Decembrist dream, they came to accept the conservative paradigm of development, and did what they sincerely believed was necessary for Russia. The Uvarov triad was weak, but its official populist ideology had as its goal the overcoming of the major class distinctions that remained as a consequence of the social policies of Peter I.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, this ideology collapsed. The attempt to unify under a populist principle a country where the majority of the population essentially lived in slavery was a highly idealist endeavor. The same can be said of Orthodoxy. The official policy of denigrating the Russian Orthodox Church was carried out not only by Peter I, but Catherine II and Alexander I. Although, it must be said that the search for a unifying social ideological was necessary for Russian society.

This trend likewise coincided with Lermontov's worldview. Lermontov was the second attempt of aristocratic literature (unparalleled in its strength and talent) to instill in Russian culture the humanist idea of the intrinsic value of man—to portray the individual as containing both cosmos and hell—a program that was larger than the democratic critical preoccupation class. In the 1830s and 1840s, the nobility did not consider its days numbered, and believed that it had all eternity in which to develop and improve. It may have thought this way right up to 1917. Russian aristocratic culture was not in decline at the time Lermontov was writing. Here, it is important to take into account the renovationist impulse of aristocratic society, which paradoxically coexisted with the belief of its cultural supremacy, which could only be countered with solitude. But solitude, even for a highly reflective personality—as shown by Lermontov—is death (a death, if you will, in Persia).

Unfortunately, the poet was killed, and killed when he was only twenty-six, and we will never know how much he took with him. The social contradictions of the country grew, and with them the tsarist reaction fueled by fear. It turned out that the moral high ground belonged to those who

mastered the rhetoric of class struggle, which was less concerned with the intrinsic dignity of the individual, and more with whether that individual was fed. Although the aristocratic period of Russian history continued, its ideological tendencies were contradictory.

The idea of universal humanism failed. It continued to live on in literature, but its value was not obvious to everyone. Absolute humanism left the literary stage, like the old Arzamasians and their attempts to find a class unifying idea. They were replaced by other writers (who were also from the nobility)—Nekrasov with his class hatred, and Dostoevsky who focused not only on the “little man,” but also the deranged man. Intelligence, erudition, and kindness meant less and less—magnanimity was resented. Increasingly, the values of the hero became the values of the fighter . . . . Against this background, Pechorin is perhaps the only hero of nineteenth century Russian literature that can be loved, but who was destined to remain unloved.

## Notes

1. A.I. Herzen, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1956), vol. 7. p. 225.
2. B. Eichenbaum, “Osnovnie problemy izucheniia Lermontova,” *Literaturnaia ucheba* (1935), no. 6, pp. 21–40; E.G. Gerstein, *Sud\_’ba Lermontova* (Moscow, 1986).
3. M.Iu. Lermontov v *vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1972), p. 523.
4. P.A. Viazemskii, *Zapisnie knizhki* (Moscow, 2003). p. 670.
5. T.F. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
7. *Istoriia russkoi literatury v 4-kh tomakh* (Leningrad, Nauka, 1981) vol. 2, p. 415.
8. *Ibid.* pp. 416–17.
9. M.Iu. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4-kh tomakh* (Moscow, 1984), vol. 3, pp. 242–43.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
14. F.M. Dostoevskii [Dostoevsky], “Dnevnik pisatel’ia za god,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1984). vol. 26, p. 117.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, p. 293.
17. *Pushkin v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow, 2005), p. 783.
18. I.I. Panaev, *Literaturnye vospominania* (Leningrad, 1950), p. 142.
19. V.G. Belinskii [Belinsky], *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: POSSPEN, 2010), p. 327.
20. V.G. Belinskii [Belinsky], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (1954), vol. 4, p. 521.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 527.

22. V.V. Rozanov, *Literaturnye ocherki* (St. Petersburg, 1902), p. 158.
23. V. Solovyov, *M.Iu. Lermontov: pro et contra*, ed. V.M. Markovich and G.E. Potapova (St. Petersburg: RKGI, 2002). [http://az.lib.ru/s/solowxew\\_wladimir\\_sergeewich/text\\_0280.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/s/solowxew_wladimir_sergeewich/text_0280.shtml).
24. N. Gogol', *Pushkin v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow, 2005), pp. 726–27.
25. Quoted in I.P. Zolotusskii, *Smekh Gogolia* (Moscow, 2005), p. 330.
26. I. Annenskii, *Kniga otrazhenii* (Moscow, 1979), p. 138.
27. Belinskii [Belinsky], *Izbrannoe*, p. 328.
28. I. Nemirovskii, “Zachem byl napisan ‘Mednyi vsadnik’” (NLO, 2014), no. 2.